



Service-Learning Tutor Education: A Model of Action

Lisa Zimmerelli

Loyola University Maryland | Baltimore, MD

Victoria Bridges

Bridges Academic Support & School Choice | Baltimore, MD

“It’s the action, not the fruit of the action, that’s important.

You have to do the right thing.

It may not be . . . in your time, that there’ll be any fruit.

But that doesn’t mean you stop doing the right thing.

You may never know what results come from your action.

But if you do nothing, there will be no result.”

— Mahatma Gandhi

Many writing centers, especially those in urban areas, have responded to systemic and structural oppression in surrounding neighborhoods by extending their services beyond the campus community. For many of us, such engagement is consistent with the liberatory ideal of democratic education. However, adding service and a social justice component to writing center obligations can feel overwhelming. Indeed, early questions directors and staff face when considering community engagement can easily sideline a potential project into a mere “we should do this one day” wish. Basic questions (Where to start? How to get funding? Will tutors commit?) and complex questions (Will my department/institution support this? What is the need? How do we know it is the need? Are we making biased presumptions about the community and its literacy practices? Might we do harm?) point to ethical considerations of community engagement. And yet, as Mahatma Gandhi reminds us, “It’s the action, not the fruit of the action, that’s important;” we can also choose to respond to the equally ethical imperative to *act*, to do something, even small, for the good of our community despite financial, institutional, or psychic barriers.

This essay is about our small action.¹ We share the integration of service-learning in tutor education as one model for writing center community engagement. After providing our project context, we detail service-learning modifications made to our

tutor education course, present benefits of service-learning, and identify what we see as four factors for success.

BACKGROUND

Dip a toe into service-learning scholarship, and you will find concerns over sustainability; this certainly is true for the two prominent community literacy models: the service-learning composition classroom and community-based writing centers.² In service-learning composition classes, students engage in projects that respond to a community need throughout the semester, and instructors link community engagement with coursework.³ Linda Adler-Kassner, Robert Crooks, and Ann Watters identify sustainability as a significant challenge to service-learning projects; although the classroom environment provides a space for formalized, structured reflection (a key service-learning component), “class and term blocks can be a huge and even crippling obstacle” to the success of community-based service-learning writing projects (11). When semester and service end, the community partner is left hoping another class will pick up where the previous class left off.

University-sponsored community-based writing/literacy centers, usually off-campus and embedded in the community, provide a range of support, from skills-based tutoring to publishing to literacy advocacy. Some, such as the Salt Lake Community College Community Writing Center—under Tiffany Rousculp’s leadership⁴—and the Colorado State University Community Literacy Center—under Tobi Jacobi’s leadership—enjoy tremendous institutional material support, (i.e., devoted faculty and budget lines, permanent location and staff, etc.). Without such support, however, sustaining a community writing center is challenging. Tutors may struggle to commit consistently, especially if the work is unpaid, and directors face the difficulty of lining up institutional support for what can be perceived as simply an add-on program, an important but disposable part of what the writing center and institution do.

COMBINED MODELS

To address the sustainability issue that plagues both service-learning models, we combined the class- and center-based models. Project sustainability was foremost in our minds because we saw sustainability as an ethical imperative: if we were going to start the work, we wanted to ensure it continued. When we transformed our fall tutor education course, Writing

Center Practice and Theory, into a service-learning course, we knew that for at least one semester annually, the service would be mandatory and integrally tied to theory, praxis, and reflection. Moreover, because our course is an extension of a larger, more comprehensive campus program—the writing center—we hoped our community engagement would be sustained by writing center volunteers every spring. So while our service-learning tutor education course provides a necessary theoretical and critical space to process the service, the writing center sustains the program all year by providing tutors (whether students in the tutor education course or tutors from our center).

PARTNERSHIP

We also sought a suitable community partner, which is key in creating an effective service-learning class. Our chosen partner, Bridges, sponsored by St. Paul's School of Baltimore provides a range of support services for Baltimore public school system students, including summer bridge programs, tutoring, job training, and social services guidance.⁵ Formerly limited to elementary and middle school students, when Bridges grew to support high school students, it needed tutors to help those struggling academically.

The partnership arrangement, established during our first semester in 2011, is largely the arrangement we continue today. Every Wednesday evening our writing center closes early to accommodate Bridges students, who arrive on a bus driven by an Americorps intern. After grabbing pizza, tutors and students pair off for about two hours to work on homework, projects, SAT prep, and college essays. Lisa and Victoria are also present nearly every week to work with students. And our plan for sustainability has worked: each spring, when our course is not offered, tutors volunteer to sustain the Loyola/Bridges program. Then, the class and program picks back up the next fall. In total, 46 tutors have tutored 40 high school students thus far.

TRANSFORMING TUTOR EDUCATION INTO SERVICE-LEARNING TUTOR EDUCATION

Modifications to our Writing Center Theory and Practice class to accommodate service learning include a weekly tutoring obligation, readings, class discussion, and reflection assignments. Previously, tutors in the class committed four hours weekly to tutoring Loyola students. When we partnered with Bridges, we cut Loyola tutoring time to two hours weekly to allow two

hours for Bridges' students. Tutors find that working with two different groups of students offers them an interrogated point of comparison; they wrestle with important issues of implicit bias, structural and systemic barriers to education, and the effects of personal and family issues on writing process (to name a few examples).

Tutors in the class read writing center, service-learning, race and class privilege, literacy, and education texts. Each class we discuss the readings in the context of our students' Bridges and Loyola tutoring experiences, and we weave Bridges into the class when we discuss composition and writing center theory and praxis. We also create opportunities for informal and formal reflection and critical engagement with the service experience. Within 24 hours of Bridges tutoring, our students post an online reflection visible only to each other and to Lisa and Victoria. These reflections are not graded and serve two purposes: a journal for the tutors and a mechanism for any needed intervention from Victoria. Because we work with high school students, we must communicate in a timely manner issues of concern with Victoria, who can relay information to the Bridges social worker (tutors, Lisa, and Victoria also meet briefly after each Bridges session expressly for this purpose). Additionally, tutors cull through their weekly reflections, looking for themes, developments, and provocations for a final reflection paper. They select one or two essays from educational theory, local news, or service-learning or other relevant scholarship and put those essays in conversation with their reflections. Many tutors also extend their service-learning experience by tackling research topics that intersect with Bridges.

TUTORS AND BRIDGES STUDENTS' REWARDS

Collectively, the course mechanisms—weekly service, readings, class discussion, and reflection—help Loyola students connect their Bridges tutoring in various and often unexpected ways to the tutoring process. At the end of the semester, tutors often comment that their Bridges tutoring, not the writing center tutoring, provided the most “hands-on” training and experience. As Lisa's teacher-research essay “A Place to Begin: Service-Learning Tutor Education and Writing Center Social Justice” attests, the rewards of community engagement are multifarious and powerful. Lisa's essay suggests that tutors increase their capacity for connection and empathy, learn to recognize and respect

reciprocal learning, and expand their notions of literacy as social justice, all of which translate into the daily practice of their tutoring.

Being mindful, however, of the danger of lopsided benefits for those engaged in service-learning, we instituted assessments with the Bridges students, asking them to complete surveys at each semester's start and close. But the Bridges students' survey responses tended to be overly positive and rather vague: they "LOVE" the program and tell us "not to change a thing" (well, except change the food from pizza!). We informally gauged Bridges students' GPA movement, but that measure hinges on so many factors that we hesitate to use it as a program efficacy marker. The next phase of the Loyola/Bridges partnership (maybe another potential tutor research project) will be creating a comprehensive, meaningful assessment plan that factors in both Loyola tutors' and Bridges students' development and growth.

The feedback we have received, although suspect, has revealed some key findings. Almost all Bridges students cite study skills, time management, organization, and homework completion as areas where they develop most. Weekly, we witness the deepening of their understanding of how to be successful students: they learn how to ask questions about their work; they dialogue about how to approach teachers with questions they need answered; they examine their organization and develop a method for keeping track of assignments. Moreover, the opportunity to work with tutors on writing assignments is for many Bridges students their first encounter with writing as a process. From evaluating the assignment prompt to exploring prewriting options to drafting alone to processing and analyzing teachers' grades and comments, students discover how much time and thought is necessary for a cogent and thorough piece of writing. Through ongoing dialogue with tutors, Bridges students develop self-reflection and self-advocacy strategies as they evaluate their own writing and study practices.

Finally, we are struck by how much Bridges students love coming to and sharing our writing center space. By the end of each fall, they begin to consider themselves as belonging in our college campus corner. They talk often to tutors about college life—both academic and social—and learn to interact with Lisa and Victoria, not as teachers, but as mentors. Writes one Bridges student, "Bridges/Loyola will help because of the simple fact that we are on a college campus with a college atmosphere and having a

college tutor you could ask any questions [sic] may have or even get a feel of how difficult it is being a college student and what you could do to help you overcome it.” For first-generation college-bound students, this early college acculturation is invaluable—and can be the first step in college retention and success.

FOUR SUCCESS FACTORS

Every service-learning project will be unique for that writing center and its community partner; nonetheless, we share the following four factors that ensured our program’s success in the hopes that they will be helpful for others who begin a writing center community engagement project.

1) Presence

We recommend that directors consider carefully if they will participate in the service with their tutors. We believe our consistent engagement with the program has been critical for its success because our presence communicates to students that we value the program pedagogically and personally; it enables us to have our “eyes and ears on the ground,” so we can respond to emerging issues; and it allows us to develop relationships, alongside our students, with all involved.

2) Flexibility

The first years of our service-learning partnership included extensive trial and error. We tried different week days (holidays complicate Mondays in the spring), experimented with ways to begin the evenings (favorites include ice-breakers, tutor-led grammar lessons, and writing prompts), and troubleshoot who should work where (we often had to ensure some particularly rambunctious Bridges participants were separated in the center). Moreover, we carefully considered who would work together. Initially, we paired students at the start of the semester; this strategy only worked, however, if all Bridges students came weekly. We then moved to a more organic matching system; Bridges students write their names and homework on a whiteboard, and tutors sign up with a student). This semester we combined these approaches. The former approach fosters deep connections between students and a stronger commitment to the program over the semester; the latter helps generate a sense of group camaraderie.

3) Trust

We invite tutors and students to help inform and shape the program, and we trust that they can identify what the program

needs and how it needs to grow. For example, one strong program addition is the tutor-recommended “College Night.” Every semester a tutor panel answers Bridges students’ college questions. Tutors then lead workshops on The Common Application, college discernment and selection, and financial aid. We began this program when a tutor learned that a Bridges student thought she did not qualify for college financial aid because she “wasn’t on food stamps.” We also invite Bridges students to tell us what they need, such as SAT prep books or readily available binders and folders, and we then provide these materials.

4) Fun

Although we have fun every week we work together, we also plan service and social events—e.g. tree plantings, basketball games, holiday parties, and end-of-year celebrations. For the holiday party, using funds donated by the Loyola Center for Community Service and Justice, the tutors and Lisa shop at the college bookstore, selecting t-shirts, hats, keychains, and other fun items for Bridges goodie bags. For the end-of-year celebrations, Loyola faculty donate books (novels, poetry, short stories), and Bridges students pick through the piles for their summer reading.

CONCLUSION

We posit that our small action, our service-learning tutor education program, is bearing fruit for one primary reason: we have made a permanent, ongoing institutional commitment to the program and to Bridges students. We are not simply dipping into Bridges students’ lives to improve our students’ tutoring skills; we will see many Bridges students throughout their high school careers, and those students will see many of our tutors throughout their college careers.

For us, this program cannot fail. It is not an option. Not sustaining the Loyola/Bridges partnership would be akin to not offering the tutor education course, or shutting down the writing center during midterms. This partnership is central, not peripheral to what we do, to our mission within the university and beyond. And we communicate it as such. Every annual report Lisa submits includes a page reporting our Bridges work; every year at least one tutor presents on a service-learning project at a writing center conference; every potential tutor that Lisa interviews commits at the outset to the weekly Bridges tutoring. Every week Loyola writing tutors and Baltimore City high school students gather to eat, write, and work together.

This level of personal and professional commitment is sustained, in turn, by the small and big successes of the Loyola/Bridges program: Matthew settling into his work without prompting; Jason earning a “B” in Physics; Deeja hitting “send” on the common app essay; Craig getting accepted with funding to Morgan State University; Angela landing her dream internship.⁶ And our tutors’ successes are equally important: Gigi deciding to pursue urban healthcare; Alexa, a pre-law student, discovering what she calls her “civic identity and responsibility”; Kathleen carrying her Loyola/Bridges experiences into her own public school classroom. Every writing center tutor participates in Loyola/Bridges at least one semester, many more do so for two or three semesters. As the cornerstone of our tutor education, service-learning is foundational for our center and integral to the development of a thoughtful, intentional, and ethical tutoring identity.

1. For the sake of clarity and consistency of voice, we employed plural first person in this essay. Lisa Zimmerelli solely made some curricular and pedagogical decisions, and Victoria Brown solely made some logistical decisions, but our program is collaborative.

2. For recent scholarship on community literacy engagement, see Cella and Restaino; Deans; Deans et al.; Rose and Weiser; Rousculp; and Ryder. For scholarship that speaks about benefits of service-learning for tutor education, see Ashley; Condon; DeCiccio; Gorkemli & Conard-Salvo; Green; Moussu; and Spillane.

3. A description of service-learning at Loyola University Maryland is located at <http://www.loyola.edu/department/ccsj/servicelearning>. The National Service-Learning Clearinghouse at gsn.nylc.org/clearinghouse offers the most comprehensive list of service-learning resources.

4. See Rousculp for a compelling reflection on her community writing center and the articulation of her discursive theory of literacy. See p. 28 for Hutchinson’s review of her book.

5. See www.stpaulsschool.org/page.cfm?p=827 for more information.

6. All Bridge’s students’ names have been changed. Loyola tutors have given permission to use their names.



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